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Disunion

The Plot to Burn Chicago

By Stephen E. Towne

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Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

At the beginning of November 1864, Col. Benjamin J. Sweet, the commandant of the Camp Douglas prisoner-of-war camp near Chicago and commander of the Army post of Chicago, began to hear reports of large numbers of men arriving on trains from Southern Illinois and now milling around the streets and saloons. Detectives also noted that men known to be officers in the Confederate States Army lodged in Chicago hotels. Army detectives working for other commands likewise confirmed the presence of rebel officers in the city.

With permission from the War Department in Washington, Sweet detailed one of his camp's 8,000 prisoners, John T. Shanks, a now-pro-Union rebel from Texas, to nose around the city to see what was afoot. Posing as an escaped prisoner, on Nov. 3 Shanks first went to Judge Buckner S. Morris's house and spoke with the judge and his wife, Mary, both of whom the Army knew had aided rebel prisoners in escaping. Judge Morris confided to Shanks that there soon would be an uprising in the city.

Three days later Shanks made his way to the Richmond House hotel, where he found Confederate officers he knew from their days under Gen. John Hunt Morgan, the Confederate raider. A few of them spilled that an attack on Camp Douglas was planned for Election Day, Nov. 8, led by a Confederate agent, Capt. Thomas Henry Hines. Hines and local armed collaborators would attack the camp from the outside, while prisoners would rise up inside. Freed and armed, the rebel

prisoners, aided by sympathetic allies, would then ravage the city and state and disrupt the Union war effort. Shanks reported this information to Camp Douglas commanders.

This wasn't the first such plot Sweet had heard about. In previous months he had become aware of the threats to Camp Douglas from combined efforts of local secret anti-government organizations and Confederate agents who were keen to release thousands of rebel troops held in northern prison camps. Initially, he had dismissed or ignored information about collusion between Chicagoans and prisoners. For instance, in May, Army officers in Kentucky had interrogated a recaptured rebel escapee from Camp Douglas, who told them that Chicago "copperheads" gave money and horses to escaped men and were led by a man named Walsh, who employed his young daughter to smuggle messages to prisoners. But evidently Sweet failed to act on this information.

Then, in August, a disgruntled rebel officer in Windsor, Ontario, approached the Army commander in Detroit with news that Captain Hines planned to lead an attack on Camp Douglas later that month, during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Alerted, Sweet hired detectives to locate the Confederates in the city, but the sleuths failed to find them. As Sweet reported, he acknowledged that a secret organization indeed existed in the city, but he didn't think it was armed or plotting "open armed hostility." If they were up to no good, he said, "I have not yet been able to detect it."

Acting on reports from other sources, however, higher-ups in the Army chain of command took the threat more seriously, and reinforced the Camp Douglas garrison as a precaution. As it turned out, Hines and other Confederates had filtered into Chicago during the convention hubbub and were poised to lead local armed conspirators in an attack, but the locals, led by a man named Charles Walsh, got cold feet at the last minute. Frustrated, Hines sent most of his force back to Canada, while he and about 25 others scattered across Southern Illinois to recruit men for another attempt.

Sweet then hired more detectives and assiduously worked to uncover plots. As he later reported, his spies inside the camp got wind of a plan to overpower the

Camp Douglas garrison on Sept. 19, timed to coincide with the Confederate seizure of the Philo Parsons steamship in Lake Erie in a plot to attack the Union warship Michigan, and free Confederate officers held on Johnson's Island. But prisoners saw his beefed up defenses and called off the effort.

Accordingly, experience told Colonel Sweet that the presence of Confederate officers in city hotels boded ill. On the evening of Nov. 6, Sweet chose to act decisively. Sending a courier by rail to Springfield to alert his immediate commander, he warned that Chicago was filled with "suspicious characters," among them Captain Hines and other Confederates who had been there in August. The danger was too great to wait for orders. Sweet planned, he reported, "to arrest these officers, if possible before morning. The head gone we can manage the body." He intended also to arrest "prominent citizens" who were part of the plot, "of which the proof is ample."

In the pre-dawn hours of Monday, Nov. 7, troops from Camp Douglas marched into Chicago, spread out and arrested Confederate officers in the Richmond House. Sweet posted guards around citizens' houses and arrested their occupants, among them Judge Morris and Charles Walsh, whom Sweet would later identify as the treasurer and brigadier general respectively of the local Sons of Liberty lodge. Acting on information, at 3 a.m. troops surrounded a house where Thomas Henry Hines was known to be staying. But the Confederate agent escaped capture by climbing into the bed of the house's residents. Claiming to be ill, the lady of the house stayed in bed all day and shielded Hines in the bedclothes. Not finding Hines, officers relieved the guard the following evening and Hines slipped out of the house and Chicago and made his way to Cincinnati, where he hid with friends.

As day broke, Chicagoans awoke in astonishment to see troops and ad hoc militia cavalry patrolling the streets, armed with the hundreds of loaded revolvers and shotguns (intended to arm the freed prisoners) seized at Charles Walsh's house. Fearing that an uprising might still occur, commanders requested and received reinforcements from other Army posts in the Midwest. In the following days, troops and detectives arrested and interrogated nearly 100 men in the city and downstate Illinois towns; their stories confirmed that the conspiracy aimed to

release the P.O.W.s in Camp Douglas. During this crisis, Chicagoans went to the polls on Election Day to cast their ballots.

National military and political leaders put the arrested Confederate officers and Chicago civilians on trial by military commission, which was held at Army department headquarters in Cincinnati in the first months of 1865. The trial functioned as a sequel to the military commission trials of the Indiana conspirators held in Indianapolis in late 1864, during the run-up to the fall state and federal elections. The Cincinnati trial of the Chicago conspirators — including Buckner Morris and Charles Walsh — lacked the election-propaganda impact of the Indianapolis trials, but helped the Lincoln administration portray opposition Democrats as traitors, and underscored the boiling tensions that defined the Midwestern states throughout the war.

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